

# 20 Alabama's Places In Peril 16

ALABAMA TRUST for HISTORIC PRESERVATION

*Too Important to Lose*

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## Alabama's Places in Peril Face Urgent Threats in 2016

On the eve of Alabama's bicentennial celebration of its establishment as a territory in 1817 and a state in 1819, Alabamians look back over two centuries and appreciate the houses, barns, bridges, churches, and cemeteries, as well as the commercial, industrial, and public buildings that stand as physical evidence of our heritage. Unfortunately, little of Alabama's earliest architecture survives. Many of our historically and architecturally significant buildings such as our entire territorial capital of St. Stephens, the building that housed the constitutional convention in Huntsville, and capitol buildings in Cahawba and Tuscaloosa have been lost. Many important places remain, but some of those are at risk due to neglect or inappropriate development.

Some of our state's many historic buildings face especially urgent threats. Consequently, the Places in Peril program (established 1994) of the Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation and the Alabama Historical Commission has identified five places with exceptional historical and/or architectural significance that require prompt attention to insure their preservation. These two residential buildings, an old post office, a church, and a remarkable cave and its visitor center face threats that could diminish their integrity or result in their total destruction.

Immediate intervention is needed to protect these structures, each of which is important to our state's history. The Revis House (Birmingham), also known as the

Bethel Church Guardhouse, still stands beside the parsonage of Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and across the street from Bethel Baptist Church. Those three structures are recognized as a National Historic Landmark, but the Guardhouse is derelict. Whispering Oaks (Opelika) also suffers from inadequate maintenance. Like Whispering Oaks, the Old Post Office (Guntersville) is structurally sound and aesthetically stunning. It stands vacant in the town's otherwise vibrant downtown historic district. Grace Episcopal Church (Clayton, Barbour Co.) was de-sanctified in the 1960s but the community lovingly maintained the handsome Neo-Gothic building until the Christmas rains of 2015 inflicted damage that revealed serious structural problems. Manitou Cave of Alabama (Fort Payne) was a thriving tourist attraction after its visitor center was built in 1961 but once abandoned in 1973 it deteriorated rapidly. Now under new, non-profit management this sacred site of the Cherokee stands ready for restoration and interpretation of its 10,000 years of human history.

You can help. Learn more about Alabama's places in peril (<http://www.alabamaheritage.com/places-in-peril>). Assist in their preservation and revitalization. Join the Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation and your local historic preservation groups. Share your ideas and your financial resources to address the threats that face these and other historic structures. Insure that they continue to serve our communities as we celebrate Alabama's bicentennial.

# Revis House (Bethel Church Guardhouse)

3236 29<sup>th</sup> Avenue North, Birmingham

This modest gable frame bungalow built circa 1929 still stands across the street from the historic Bethel Baptist Church and next door to the church's second parsonage. It remains in the family of James Revis, a deacon in the church during the pastorate of Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth (1922-2011), who was the founder of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights headquartered in the church and a national leader in the Civil Rights Movement. After the church was bombed on Christmas day in 1956, destroying the original parsonage, the front porch of the Revis House was used by volunteer "civil rights guards" to watch the church and its newly constructed parsonage. Parishioners soon enclosed half of the front porch with jalousie windows and installed a gas heater for the guards, each of whom also served shifts in a shack behind the new parsonage to guard the rear of the houses. In 1961 when Freedom Riders were assaulted in Birmingham and their bus burned in Anniston, they were harbored in the parsonage for several stressful days. Consequently, in 2005 the historic Bethel Baptist Church, its parsonage built in 1957, and the Revis House were designated a National Historic Landmark for their role "in the origins and evolution of the church-led southern civil rights movement of the 1950s that used nonviolent mass techniques to bring social change to racial democracy."

The historic church building and the 1957 parsonage are stable, both under the auspices of the Bethel Baptist Church Historic Community Restoration Fund, a non-profit group associated

with the active church which is located in a new and larger building nearby. However, the Revis House sits derelict. Recent efforts by descendants of James Revis to repair the roof and windows have been inadequate to protect the historic structure. In recent years the porch windows were stolen and there are now holes in the roof. The owner, the community, and the City of Birmingham all support stabilization of the building and revitalization, perhaps as part of the recently proposed Birmingham Civil Rights National Park. That would also include the Gaston Motel (on the Eleven Endangered list of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2015: <https://savingplaces.org/places/a-g-gaston-motel>) and portions of the African American business district near 16th Street Baptist Church, which suffered a fatal bombing in 1963.



The Revis House has received a temporary restraining order to prevent its demolition but it requires immediate repairs to its roof, structural elements, and perimeter to protect the integrity of extant architectural fabric and features. A preservation plan is also needed to guide restoration of the residence to its appearance during the Civil Rights Movement and a master plan is necessary to identify appropriate uses for the historic building.

For more information and to help save the Revis House, contact April Odom, Office of Public Information, City of Birmingham, (205) 254-2823.



Revis House, Birmingham



# Whispering Oaks

Opelika, ca 1900

This stylish, two-story, brick, Beaux-Arts residence stands in a prominent location in the Geneva Street National Register Historic District. It was recently used as a restaurant and B&B but now stands vacant and in desperate need of repair. Roof and cove gutter problems have damaged the handsome exterior wooden cornice and threaten to spread wood rot and insect infestation to the gracious interior that currently remains intact. Elaborate neoclassical woodwork surrounds original doors, windows, and multiple fireplaces. A dated commercial kitchen needs new appliances to meet current codes.

The City has threatened demolition due to the

owner's ongoing neglect of the exterior, but the local preservation community is fighting to save the landmark building. A relatively new metal roof over the original slate seems serviceable, but the cove gutter problems continue to damage the vintage entablature. The owner would like to fix the building but needs a business partner with capital and a business plan to revitalize the grand old residence as a restaurant, B&B, or another appropriate use.

Contact: Lisa Thrift, Historic Preservation Coordinator, City of Opelika, 700 Fox Trail, Opelika, AL 36801, (334) 705-5155, [LThrift@opelika-al.gov](mailto:LThrift@opelika-al.gov).



Whispering Oaks, Opelika



# Old Post Office

Guntersville, 1940-41

This restrained Colonial Revival/Art Deco structure of marble and brick was designed by Louis A. Simon, Supervising Architect for the Department of the Treasury. The lobby features a 1947 mural by Russell Hardman of Native Americans meeting DeSoto. The Old Post Office is on the National Register, owned by the City, and located in Guntersville's historic and entertainment districts next door to a shuttered restaurant in a historic building that is for sale.

The Post Office has dropped ceilings upstairs and a few other 1960s modifications, but the original marble lobby, brass mailboxes, and handsome stained wood doors and trim are in great shape although the building has been vacant for several years. Recently repaired problems with the cove gutters and roof system (a combination of slate hip and ridge with a flat rubber roof on the mail room) caused several interior walls to effloresce and the lead-based paint to flake. An Alabama Historical Commission grant in 2015 funded scraping, re-glazing, sealing, and painting the original exterior wood windows. Exterior window and stair wells do not drain and asbestos mitigation is needed in the boiler room.

Initial plans to renovate the spacious building for City offices have been shelved because needs have changed, but the City wants to revitalize the handsome building through sale or lease to anchor one end of its otherwise vibrant historic



Old Post Office, Guntersville

and entertainment districts.

Contact: Ms. Milla Sachs, Executive Assistant to the Mayor, 341 Gunter Avenue, Guntersville, Alabama 35976, (256) 571-7560.





# Manitou Cave of Alabama

## Fort Payne

This place may have seen human activity for 10,000 years, but the past few decades have been tough on the terrain. Manitou Cave of Alabama is a sacred space for the Cherokee. Manitou, an Ojibwa word, means Spirit. It contains inscriptions from the Cherokee syllabary, which was invented by Sequoyah in 1821 while he lived in Willstown, known now as Ft. Payne. The Trail of Tears may have passed below Manitou Cave of Alabama. English language graffiti inside the huge cavern dates as early as 1814. The cave also contains fossils and at least one rare and endangered species, a water snail. In the mid-twentieth century the cave was commercialized and a Mid-Century Modern visitor center was built in 1961. The tourist attraction closed in 1973 and the pavilion was abandoned, but the concrete steps and wood and steel bridges inside the cave are intact and still lead to the “Ballroom” that featured electric lights and natural air conditioning (a constant 58 degrees) in the 1920s.

Today the pavilion and the picnic area around it are derelict but salvageable. The cave, spring-fed pond, and ten acres are managed by Manitou Cave of Alabama, a newly formed non-profit organization. Since October 2015, a state-of-the-art cave gate has been installed to keep vandals out and to permit easy access for bats. Some brush and debris have been cleaned from the site by cavers and other volunteers, and organized groups have toured the cave, which is on the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage. Local tourism officials and a respected anthropologist who is familiar with the site have endorsed the importance of protecting this special place, which needs a master site plan, rehabilitation of the visitor center and trail system, and a viable business plan to finance responsible stewardship in perpetuity.

For more information, visit [ManitoucaveofAL.org](http://ManitoucaveofAL.org), follow Manitou Cave of AL on Facebook, or contact Annette F. Reynolds, at: [ManitoucaveofAL@gmail.com](mailto:ManitoucaveofAL@gmail.com).



Manitou Cave, Fort Payne



Great Spirit Mount, photo by Alan Cressler

# Grace Episcopal Church

Clayton, Barbour County, ca. 1875

This small, frame, Neo-Gothic chapel was de-sanctified in the 1960s but has been lovingly maintained over the years by local garden clubs, community members, and the family that donated the land for the church. The Camelia Garden Club and friends have repaired and secured the building. The City has mowed the lawn, and the founding family has contributed time and materials to preserve the building. It was added to the National Register in 1995.

The building is still a presence in the community and is especially close to the heart of the local garden club, which hosts an annual Every Light a Prayer for Peace event in the building each December. In 2015, the torrential Christmas rains damaged the building and revealed serious structural problems. Peeling paint and flaking plaster are a direct result of the rains due to problems with a relatively new roof that may have been installed on rotten (and incredibly steep) roof decking. A spongy floor and seriously shifted walls suggest there may be a rotten sill or collapsed foundation.

The Episcopal Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast, which still owns the building, supports preservation of the building but is unable to fund the needed repairs. The garden club, mayor,



and founding family hope to insure long-term preservation of the National Register structure which is located just off the town square. A condition assessment by a historical architect and a comprehensive preservation plan are needed to preserve this architecturally significant structure that still houses its original pews, which are attached to the exterior walls to make the most of the space in the intimate interior, and vintage stained glass windows.

Contact: Mayor Rebecca Beasley, City of Clayton, (334) 740-1974, or Carol Kleinhoff, (334) 687-6453.

**THE ALABAMA TRUST  
IS A NON-PROFIT, STATEWIDE  
MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATION  
DEVOTED TO THE PRESERVATION  
OF ALABAMA'S HISTORIC  
STRUCTURES AND PLACES.**

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